

## Nancy Wheeler, Private Investigator by Aethria

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**Summary:**

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So when Billy Hargrove shoved Steve in the hall before school, she was genuinely surprised to see Steve turn and grin, the two pushing and wrestling and trying to mess up each other's hair on the way to class.

## **Nancy Wheeler, Private Investigator**

### **Author's Note:**

Thanks to my beta reader Carly (wantanymukewiththatcake on tumblr) and my new friends from the Harringrove Discord. You gave me too many ideas.

Nancy will admit, she should have noticed it sooner. Sure, she had been distracted by her new relationship with Jonathan, but that was no excuse. Even after their breakup, she was Steve's only real friend. She needed to keep an eye on him, make sure he was okay.

So when Billy Hargrove shoved Steve in the hall before school, she was genuinely surprised to see Steve turn and grin, the two pushing and wrestling and trying to mess up each other's hair on the way to class. Last she had heard, they had a massive fight at the Byers' place and had avoided each other since. When had they started acting like friends?

Once upon a time, Nancy might have let it slide. But that Nancy hadn't hunted a monster, lost her best friend, or stabbed a child with a fire poker to save his life.

This Nancy had, and she would use her new investigation skills to get to the bottom of this. She owed it to Steve, to make sure he was safe.

At lunch, she tried bringing it up with Jonathan.

"So, Steve seems to have made a new friend," she said, nodding at the table where Billy was reenacting some story with their plastic utensils to Steve's uproarious laughter.

Jonathan's brow furrowed in confusion. "New? Nance, he hasn't sat with us at lunch in over a month. Who did you think he was with?"

She did her best to hide her surprise. "Oh, I don't know, I just didn't realize they were such good friends. Hey, did you finish developing those pictures of the quarry yet?"

While Jonathan talked about photography, she worked to reorganize her plan of attack. She needed to get more information about this weird friendship between Billy and Steve.

After school, she cornered Dustin before he could sneak off to AV club. She got straight to the point.

“How long has Steve been hanging out with Billy?”

“Uh, what? Like a couple of months now, why?” Dustin said, looking startled.

She ignored his question and pressed on. “Have you seen them hanging out after school? On the weekends?”

He shifted uneasily.

“Dustin.” She was using her big sister voice, knowing he would cave.

“Aww shit,” he said. “C’mon Nancy, Steve swore me to secrecy! I can’t betray him like this.

She raised an eyebrow at that. “What’s so secretive about him and Billy?”

Dustin clapped his hands over his mouth and shook his head frantically.

“I’ll buy you a Three Musketeers bar.”

He considered it for a moment. “Two.”

“Fine.”

“I went to Steve’s for some advice before I went on a date, only he wasn’t there yet and Billy answered the door. He said Steve had given him a key so he could come over whenever and did my hair for me.”

Nancy raised an eyebrow at that. “And has he been there since then?”

“Usually yeah. He always calls Steve ‘Princess’ and calls me Steve’s kid.”

“Have fun in AV club, Dustin.” She backed off so he could pass her, sorting through the new information as she headed to the parking lot to meet with Jonathan.

Later that night, while doing homework in her bedroom, she was startled to hear the now familiar roar of a blue Camaro pulling up at the Sinclair’s. She peeked out her window to see Erica, smiling and giggling as she tumbled out of the backseat, still dressed in her pink tutu from ballet. She waved crazily and yelled a cheerful goodbye before pounding up the stairs into the house. Only after the door closed behind her did the Camaro roar away again.

Rather than wait to until tomorrow, Nancy barged into Mike’s room and snatched his walkie talkie out of his hand.

“Lucas, I need to talk to you.”

There was a long pause before a tentative “Nancy?” came across the speaker.

“When did Billy Hargrove become welcome at your house? Didn’t he attack you?”

“Yeah, but he apologized two weeks after. He came to drop Max off and pulled me aside and everything. It was so weird.”

“And how did he get Erica to like him?”

“He came over with Steve and helped her bake cookies and painted her nails. Now she won’t let anyone else babysit her or pick her up from dance.”

“Thanks.” Nancy tossed the walkie talkie back at Mike and left the door open behind her as she left the room.

As she lay in bed that night she considered what she had learned that day. For some reason, Billy had made amends with Lucas two weeks after the incident at the Byers’ house. Somewhere between then and the present, he had become close enough to Steve for a key to his house and a chance to tag along with babysitting duties. As she

planned a way to get a hold of Max without Billy seeing, she reached for her phone on her night stand.

Hopper's gruff voice greeted her.

"Hey Chief, I need you to do a favor for me."

Nancy was in luck the next morning. She got to school early, just in time to see Max and Billy splitting up to head to their respective buildings. She hurried to catch up to the redhead, glad that a few weekends playing D&D at the Wheeler's had got them at least to the level of acquaintances. She also had no qualms about spilling the beans on her brother's behavior.

"And this started within a week of the...incident?"

"Yeah. After a couple of weeks they would drop us off somewhere and go hang out on their own. Then, when Steve had to watch us Billy started to stick around too. He's not so bad now. Still a dick, but not so angry."

Nancy thanked her, and then both girls had to rush off to class.

It wasn't until later, when she was trying to talk her way through everything with Jonathan as he drove her home, that she realized the true missing piece to the puzzle.

Or rather, Will realized what she was missing.

"If Max knocked him out at our place, how come he wasn't still there when we got back from the cabin?"

Nancy startled, having forgot he was in the backseat, but her mind began churning with questions. She murmured a distracted goodbye and rushed inside. She needed to finish her homework before Mike got home.

She needn't have rushed. Mike got home five minutes after the clock struck curfew, attempting to rush into his room before their mother

could catch him. He began to protest when Nancy followed him, but stopped when he saw the slightly wild look in her eyes.

“Why wasn’t Billy Hargrove at the Byers’ when we got back?”

Mike tripped over his words in his rush to answer her. “Steve figured Billy shouldn’t be there when he woke up. He was supposed to drop him off at home. I don’t know what happened - next thing I know, Steve’s calling from his place saying he wasn’t coming back to sleep over with the rest of us. I thought I heard someone in the background, and he hung up in a hurry.”

“Was it a guy? Was it Billy?”

“I guess it could have been. Jeez, Nance, why are you being so weird about this?”

She chose to ignore him.

The next day was Saturday, and she decided to visit Jonathan. They would hang out in his room, listen to music, and have a family dinner complete with Joyce, Hopper, Will, and Eleven. She was going to let Steve’s weird new friendship go, and have a normal day with her boyfriend.

That idea was benched when Will asked if she’d made any progress over dinner.

Nancy started to shoot him a look that she usually reserved for Mike when Joyce chimed in.

“Oh Billy and Steve? I ran into them the other day. They were leaning on each other and laughing when they left the movie theater. Billy looked like he was going to say something, but then he saw me locking up the store and it was like a switch flipped. He went all quiet and pulled away from Steve.”

“Weird,” Nancy mumbled weakly, staring into her runny serving of mashed potatoes.

After dinner, Hopper pulled her aside on the porch before she could go home.

"I did that background check like you asked," he said. "Just some minor trespassing and vandalism charges - normal dumb teenager stuff."

Nancy felt a weight lift off her shoulders. She wasn't sure what she was expecting from Billy's past, but she was glad it wasn't anything too terrible.

"But the chief from their old town had some interesting information for me. Right before they skipped town a 16 year old boy was found beaten to death in an alley. They wrote it off as a hate crime because he was black and figured they'd never catch the guy."

Nancy felt her breath catch in her throat. She had heard about Billy zeroing in on Lucas, but could he be capable of actual hate and racism?

Was Steve friends with a murderer?

She slept fitfully that night, and woke early to the sounds of various preteens tromping into her house for another campaign. She got ready slowly, doing her best to hide the evidence of her sleepless night before heading downstairs. She caught Max in the kitchen rooting through their cupboards, and joined her in compiling snacks for the kids in the basement. When the tray was filled with various chips, candies, cookies, and other junk food, Nancy finally broke the silence.

"Max, why did you move to Hawkins?"

The other girl stiffened a bit and forced a shrug.

"Please tell me. I swear I won't tell anyone, I just want to know what Steve's getting into by being Billy's friend."

Max bit her lip, but the mention of Steve seemed to win her over.

“I’m not entirely sure. Billy was late one day so I skated home. Neil was there and got really pissed that Billy didn’t drive me and took off to find him. When Billy came home he was all beat up, but Neil didn’t come back for another couple of hours. When he did he told us to pack up because we were moving.”

Nancy smiled softly at her. “Thanks Max. Have fun with your game.”

Nancy went back to her room to think about everything once more. It was obvious that something had happened between Billy and Steve after their fight at the Byers’. Once they started hanging out, Billy decided to apologize to Lucas and started being friendlier to the kids. They had moved because of something Billy’s dad had caught him doing. She wondered about the boy Hopper had mentioned. Had Billy’s dad killed him? Was he just a racist who flipped out over his son’s choice in friends? That seemed like an overreaction, even if Max had previously hinted about her stepdad’s anger problems.

It wasn’t until the other kids had gone home (picked up by Billy and Steve, ironically), that El helped Nancy figure it out.

As Nancy was gently running a brush through the younger girl’s hair, Eleven turned her big eyes to lock their gazes in the mirror.

In her quiet, innocent voice, Eleven asked, “Why is Billy so scared to take Steve to the Snow Ball?”

And all Nancy could think was oh.